DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 306 574 CS 211 790

AUTHOR Gradin, Sherrie L.
TITLE English Studies and the Metaphors We Live By.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (40th, Seattle, WA, March 16-18, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Philosophy; English Instruction; Higher Education; *Metaphors; *Models; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Discourse; Empowerment; Metaphorical Thought

ABSTRACT

Metaphors affect the way teachers and students see, think, and act, and can be useful in building models to empower students. Three models and their metaphorical foundations are currently at work in pedagogical stances attempting to empower students: (1) the conflict metaphor; (2) the midwife metaphor; and (3) the web metaphor. A metaphor of conflict is built through a rhetoric of aggression that is exclusionary and defeating; in spite of the beneficial side to this model of struggle, the negative can outweigh the positive. The metaphorical construct of teacher as midwife leads to "connected" teaching and learning. The midwife image views the teacher as a conductor of knowledge. This model may be difficult for the male to internalize, and it appears to view teachers as passive. Yet, teachers must be actively present to help students grapple with positive aspects of the struggle inherent in this model: conflicting voices, challenges, difficult ideas, and strenuous reading and writing tasks. Finally, the metaphor of the web may be more easily internalized by male teachers and students, and it implies more structure than that of the midwife metaphor. The web metaphor suggests that students already have the authority and voice with which to spin their own interpretations and conversations about texts. When connected to a model of writing, the metaphor both suggests a final product and views writing as a process. English educators need to choose the best metaphors to empower students. (MM)

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"English Studies and the Metaphors We Live By"

Sherrie L. Gradin

English Department

University of New Hampshire

Durham, NH 03824

603-862-1313

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English Studies and the Metaphors We Live By

> For all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts tangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them.
>
> George Eliot

One of the current concerns in the field of rhetoric and composition is the empowering of our students. What it means to empower, of course, is contingent on circumstances; it probably entails different variables for Paulo Freire than it does for the teacher at an open-admissions state university, and still something else at Harvard. For some it will mean the passing on of the discourse conventions of the academy, for others the giving of voice and authority to students, and for others the democratization of students. Whatever our agendas, however, in order to make public and test our various goals, we build models by which to teach and put forth a philosophy for American education. In our classrooms and conversations, at our conferences, and in our published writings, we use metaphor to help us explain, to understand, and to build these models. (Metaphors that come

readily to mind are education as a journey, argument as war, the student as explorer, reading and writing as producing and consuming, and likewise, education as a commodity and students as consumers.)

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have suggested that the metaphors we use have the power to direct our actions, to define and create reality. They write that

> metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies. (Metaphors We Live By 156).

Metaphors affect the way we see, think, and act. Using a certain metaphor is similar to what Kenneth Burke, in his general theory of language use, calls "terministic screens," or as I think of it, like putting on colored glasses; it creates a world where objects the same color as the tinted lenses are accented, and those that are not recede into the background. I remember my delight in reaching a perfect score as a novice trapshooter, simply because I took the advice of an oldtimer and donned rose-tinted glasses: the distracting deep blue of the Wyoming sky faded into the background, but the orange ring of the clay pigeon jumped to the forefront. Like rose-tinted glasses to the trap-

shooter, metaphors can be useful in building the models by which we can empower our students.

But equally important to remember is that metaphor can limit, constrain, and in fact, create a negative reality as well as a positive one. Because of the power of metaphor, its ability to exclude and even debilitate, and because as educators we are so instrumental in shaping the world of the university, and thus the conditions under which we must work and our students must learn, it is crucial that we examine and select our metaphors with care. We must become aware of the consequences of the language we choose. In this discussion I will look at three models currently at work in pedagogical stances attempting to empower our students, and the metaphors on which these models are based. I will examine the most constraining construct, that of struggle or conflict, and two possible alternatives to it, those of the midwife and the web, highlighting as I do so, the benefits and dangers of each.

The recent work of David Bartholomae has shown that students, and especially basic readers and writers, do not begin their academic careers with the skills necessary to function within the special discourse community of the university. In his essay "Wanderings: Misreadings, Miswritings, Misunderstandings," Bartholomae comes to the conclusion that students have to "appropriate or be appropriated by a specialized discourse," and they must do this as though they were "easily and comfortably" a

member of the academy. Students need to "invent" themselves as readers, and invent an act of reading "by assembling a language to make a reader and a reading possible, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of an institution" (93). Doing this is difficult for students, and Bartholomae uncovers why: the learning model for the university is constructed through metaphors of struggle and conflict. For his purposes, Bartholomae looks closely at the way this model affects student writers and readers. The student attempting to say something about a reading comes face to face with a model that Bartholomae clarifies as follows:

> Interpretation thus begins with an act of aggression, a displacement, an attempt to speak before one is authorized to speak, and it begins with a misreading--a recomposition of a text itself speaking. (93)

He is aware of the difficulties this paradigm poses. "If you accept this scenario," says Bartholomae,

> then the problems for a student reader are considerable--and they are not, at least not solely, cognitive. I am presenting reading and writing as a struggle within the languages of our contemporary life. (93)

Even though he later points out that teachers should pay attention to metaphors, and that reading and writing instruction is

"loaded with images of mastery and control" which makes acceptable behavior as it is called for by the institution even more difficult (96), he himself accepts the construct of struggle, and goes on to build a model for reading based on metaphors of conflict.[1] He proposes that we teach students how to work within this model so they can find the voice of authority needed to function in the university. Bartholomae's goal of helping students find personal authority is admirable and his work demonstrates this, but through the language with which he builds his model in "Wanderings: Misreadings, Miswritings, Misunderstandings" he defeats his good intentions and simply reinvents the struggle.

The "entailments" (Lakoff and Johnson), or natural extensions of the metaphor of struggle lead Bartholomae to create a prototype for teaching reading and writing based on aggression, violence, and violation. He recommends, for instance, that a student attempting to write about the Phaedrus would be helped by "being given a moment, a project, a beginning that violates the conventional habit of mind. . . one that could provide a working metaphor for the act of reading" (101). He goes on to say that we would have to teach the students how to do this violating since it not something that they come to on their own, thereby

[1] In his most recent work, Bartholomae has clearly paid attention to his metaphors. The construct of struggle is no longer so visible, rather it is replaced by language such as labor-intensive and strong, though the idea of aggression remains.

indicating himself that functioning within the model of conflict is difficult for students. He believes that in order to interpret a text, the students in his study needed to assume an authority that was not yet theirs (92). He also claims that reimagining a text in order to speak about it implies violence done to the author, the text, and even the student reader\writer (92). While I fully agree that students need to question conventional habits of mind, if we consider the implications of Bartholomae's metaphor we have created a task for students that suggests they need to violate (that is profane, desecrate, or injure) what an author has said; and do violence (that is damage or abuse) in order to interpret a text.[2] This is a frightening model within which to read and write when the world is already a place of aggression and violence. An alternative metaphor needs to be found. I advocate a model built on metaphors which assumes students already have authority but need to exercise it in such a way that offers alternatives to the "conventional habit of thinking," rather than a violation of these habits. Thankfully, most students do not live by a creed of violence and violation, and there is something ethically disturbing about an educational model that asks them to do so.

Whether or not it is empowering for the majority of students, some will adapt to this model of conflict, and "succeed"

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[2] Professor Bartholomae is not the only educator to rely on a rhetoric of aggression and violence; the use of this metaphorical construct is widespread. I have chosen his essay for purposes of explanation and because most readers are familar with his work.

within the construct of the academy without a great many problems. And this indicates a possibility for benefits to the model of struggle. Conflict and internal tension, for example, can move students and teachers to learn, to meet challenges they might not otherwise be willing to encounter. In "From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle," a narrative in which she reflects on her experiences as a student in China during the Cultural Revolution and her more recent experiences as a teacher of composition in the United States, Min-zhan Lu writes:

> For in spite of the frustration and confusion I experienced growing up caught between two conflicting worlds, the conflict ultimately helped me to grow as a reader and writer. Constantly having to switch back and forth between the discourse of home and that of school made me sensitive and self-conscious about the struggle I experienced everytime I tried to read, write, or think in either discourse. Eventually it led me to search for constructive uses for such struggle. (437-38)

The frustration of these conflicting discourses led to a complexity that kept her "from losing sight of the effort and choice involved in reading or writing with and through a discourse" (447). Similarly, the demands and frustrations that our students face as they attempt to gain access to the special discourse com-

munity of the academy can foster a sensitivity to reading and writing and a critical consciousness. Moreover, working through some difficultly or trying situation can be rewarding. The American work ethic, for example, sees the triumph over struggle as positive. It can lead to political and economic success, and perhaps spiritual well-being. The problem, however, and we need look no farther than the streets of our towns and cities at the increasing numbers of the hungry, poor, and homeless to see this, is that the struggle is not a guarantee for success. In fact, many do not benefit at all from the struggle. Likewise, in our classrooms certain aspects of the model of struggle can be beneficial for some, but for others the negative aspects override the positive and the attempt to work within this model can be devastating--especially when the metaphorical paradigm is accompanied by a language of violence and violation.

Recent feminist work has suggested, for instance, that it is particularly hard for women, and I would suggest ethnic students as well (see Belenky et al, Martin, and Isenberg and Harrington), because they are not often as familiar with the agonistic approach to life and learning as are American males. Also, women are socialized from a young age to believe that it is inappropriate for them to act in an aggressive manner, and in kind, society is socialized to consider it inappropriate when women do act aggressively, or even assertively. Therefore, the difficulties caused by the model of struggle are compounded for

women. Moreover, if the model developed by the academy is difficult to work within for an average student, imagine the debilitating effects this metaphorical paradigm might have on students who know too well the reality of aggression and violation--the pain of emotional, physical and sexual abuse.[3]

Professor Bartholomae has uncovered an important assumption underlying our educational system: that learning is necessarily a struggle. This construct of conflict is built through a rhetoric of aggression that is exclusionary and defeating; in spite of the beneficial side to the model of struggle, the negative can outweigh the positive becoming debilitating rather than useful. Bartholomae himself astutely describes the current educational paradigm as a "scramble for power and for violation" (114), a battle, he acknowledges, that the student doesn't win (116). With a change in metaphor, however, this bleak prognosis for students attempting to enter the academy can change.

In their study on the development of women, Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule found that

> many women take naturally to connected knowing, finding it easier to follow authors than to attack them, easier to get close to them than to stand apart; but they do not always find

[3] Research by Belenky et al, suggests that women students who are survivors of sexual abuse have problems that are exacerbated by questions of power and authority.

> it easy to enter perspectives very different from their own. (121)

This indicates that a metaphor other than that of violation and aggression would be more beneficial for women students. In fact, one woman student looked at the task of interpreting the poem as if she were "eavesdropping on two people talking. In interpreting the poem, she said that she tried to discover 'what he was trying to say to this other person'" (121). Here the students have offered an alternative metaphor for finding a voice: one that implies listening and discovering rather than displacing and doing violence. In an attempt to offer students a model where this approach to establishing authority can flourish, rather than the traditional metaphor of struggle, the authors of this study pose a model of teaching based on the metaphorical construct of teacher as midwife, which leads to what they call "connected" teaching and learning.

The image of midwife is one that views the teacher as a conductor, not a securer of knowledge. Just as a midwife helps bring a child into the world, the teacher working from this paradigm can draw out knowledge rather than deposit it, can "assist students in giving birth to their own ideas, in making their own tacit knowledge explicit and elaborating it" (Women's Ways 217). This metaphor assumes that students already have ideas, already have the authority with which to become readers, writers, and thinkers within the academy, and it encourages stu-

dents to speak with their own active voices. In this model, students "deliver their word to the world," and converse "with other voices--past and present" (219) rather than displacing these voices.

Obviously this metaphor carries with it maternal implications since midwives have traditionally been female. The authors of Women's Ways of Knowing celebrate this extension of the metaphor, and make it an integral part of their model. "The mid-wife teacher's first concern," they write

> is to preserve the student's fragile newborn thoughts, to see that they are born with their truth intact, that they do not turn into acceptable lies.
>
> The second concern in maternal thinking is to foster the child's growth. Connected teachers support the evolution of their students' thinking . . . Mid-wife teachers focus not on their own knowledge (as the lecturer does) but on the student's knowledge. They contribute when needed, but it is always clear that the baby is not theirs but the student's. (218)

Clearly there are problems with this metaphor, just as there are with that of the struggle. Where, for instance, does this paradigm place the male teacher and student? It is a metaphorical construct that will leave many feeling ill at ease.

Because American society has not, at least until quite recently, allowed men to take part in the birthing process, or sanctioned the idea of men participating in child care, many men will have a difficult time accepting and internalizing this model. Perhaps it would help to view this as "nurturant thinking" rather than the more selective "maternal thinking." And perhaps also, as men become more active in child care and the birthing process, this paradigm will become more comfortable. Furthermore, for centuries men have already "appropriated" the birthing metaphor for their own uses. It is used, for example, in their descriptions of the advent of great ideas, and to describe the creative process. It is, therefore, not a metaphor completely strange to men. In fact, the idea of teacher as midwife itself can be dated as far back as Socrates and what he called the maieutic mode of inquiry in which latent ideas are drawn out into clear consciousness. This model, then, should be easier to adapt to than that of the traditional one of struggle, aggression, and violence.

This image of midwifery may also fall short for many of us in that it appears to be a fairly passive role. But Belenky et al, suggest that this is a false constraint. The midwife in their estimation is not "just another student; the role carries special responsibilities" (227). Since giving birth can be a struggle, and in some cases a violent one, a paradigm built on the metaphorical construct of midwife is not free from the complications that can arise in a model of struggle. I would argue,

however, that this is why the teacher-midwife's role is so crucial. The teacher is actively present to help students grapple with the positive aspects of the struggle that are inherent in this model: conflicting voices, challenges, difficult ideas, and strenuous reading and writing tasks. Likewise, just as the midwife can help alleviate a violent or damaging birth, the teacher can lessen the possibility that students will be excluded from the special discourse of the academy by a rhetoric of violence. Without the midwife-teacher, the ideas may die at conception, or be strangled by neglect or struggle, before they become fully alive and voiced.

The authors also claim that unlike other models for teaching this one does not anesthetize, and it is when anesthesia is administered that a woman giving birth becomes a passive spectator. The "midwife-teachers," they argue, "do not administer anesthesia. They support their students' thinking, but they do not do their students' thinking for them" (217). Midwife-teachers do have authority, but it is authority based on cooperation not subordination, "it does not entail power over the students" (227). Thus, both teacher and student are active participants in the move toward empowerment.

Finally, in considering the metaphor of the web, its benefits and constraints for building a pedagogical model of empowerment, I will offer a metaphor that might be more easily internalized by male teachers and students as well as women. The image

of the web implies more structure than that of the midwife metaphor. It hints of a grand design as Janet Emig's collection of essays The Web of Meaning, and Robert Frost's poem "Design" illustrate, perhaps suggesting a less passive role for teachers than that of midwife. But the metaphor also suggests that students already have the authority and voice with which to spin their own interpretations and conversations about texts: the web begins within the self and is woven into a complex pattern. It is the spinner who ultimately controls the final interpretation. This is not to say that the interpretation cannot go astray, cannot be shortsighted, or even flimsily spun. The teacher plays an important role, one that relies on experience, skill, and guidance. We can think of Charlotte in Charlotte's Web, spinning a web of words with which to save Wilbur's life--students and teachers are both word spinners, the teachers simply a more polished design-maker. The words and experience are shared, assuming that the student has a voice and a right to speak, unlike Bartholomae's student who had to assume an authority that was not yet his (92).

When connected to a model of writing, the metaphor of the web suggests not only a final product--the completed design or the woven whole-cloth--but it views writing as a process. A text is created through knitting, connecting, and weaving ideas and words together. It also implies a tightness, an interrelatedness, and a complexity between the parts and the whole.

To spin their own web, to write their own text, perhaps a text about another's text, need not take on the notion of displacement and aggression as it does in the model of struggle. Instead, they can feel empowered by thinking of themselves as web spinners weaving together a complex, structured, and carefully crafted text.

In Women's Ways of Knowing, the authors submit that the metaphor of the web actually grants students power from the outset. It diffuses the hierarchy of power that would deny empowerment to average students and marginalized students alike. Because of the complexity of the web, they write,

> no one position dominates over the rest. Each person--no matter how small--has some potential for power; each is always subject to the actions of others. It is hard to imagine other ways of envisioning the world that offer as much potential for protection to the immature and the infirm. (178)

This translates, then, as metaphor that offers those students who are the least adept at academic discourse, and those who are actually debilitated by the system or other extenuating circumstances, a safety net--a place where they can assert their authority without falling prey to a hierarchical structure that employs a dominating power that would pull the net out from under them for attempting to speak before a voice is "rightfully

theirs." It also offers a model of teaching that sees the classroom as a group of spinners weaving together a web, or cloth that connects each spinner to the rest. They are all creating meaning together, and when one spinner speaks, by virtue of the silken threads that connect them, the impact of that voice is felt at every place within the parts of the whole. Rather than an image of vertical structure that assumes the few at the top dominate the many at the bottom, the perception of the web allows that "even the least can affect all others by the slightest pull on the gossamer thread" (Women's Ways 179). Those who will have the most difficulty "appropriating" the specialized discourse of the academy are empowered.

If we remove the rose glasses that highlight these positive aspects of the web metaphor, and replace them with a darker lens, we can find limiting and constraining aspects of this model as with any other. The metaphor connotes the possibility of insubstantiality and fragility, for instance. As an image of student voice it reflects the possibility for a flimsy reading, an inadequate response, a less than strong argument. It promotes the chance that students will get entangled or snared in faulty reasoning. While I do not want to deny this darker side of the metaphor, I propose that even with its drawbacks, it is less debilitating and more empowering than other metaphorical constructs might be, and especially that of the model of struggle that includes within it the language of violation and aggression.

If a student's attempt is unsatisfactory or weak, it can be nurtured and strengthened. This approach assumes the snared students can eventually free themselves without violation to texts or other voices. Because of the connection to other students and teachers, the student is granted empowerment. Moreover, the paradigm of the web does not deny the positive aspects of struggle: the web is a social construct with social relations within it, and these relations always include conflict as well as cooperation. By virtue of the many voices and ideological differences that will be raised in a classroom where students are empowered to speak, tension and conflict will be present, but they will result in learning and the gaining of authority through challenge and rigor, rather than through aggression and displacement. The metaphor of struggle and its extensions of violence and violation, which keeps the specialized discourse conventions of the academy foreign to many students, is not continually recreated, and thus denying students the empowerment the model was intended to give.

One might argue that there is a difference between simply using a metaphor and taking one literally. Because metaphor has traditionally been viewed a convention of language rather than as a means of conceptualizing the world, the idea that metaphor can create reality is often denied. But, as Lakoff and Johnson argue, although it is reasonable enough to assume that words alone don't change reality, "changes in our conceptual system do

change what is real for us and how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions" (147-46). Consider, for instance, the way in which the metaphorical construct of plate tectonics changed the way in which we understand how the continents formed. Or, if we doubt for a moment that language is a dangerously powerful tool, remember, it was not only through violence, but through metaphor that Hitler convinced an entire nation to slaughter the Jewish people. Through his metaphorical construct Jews became vermin that needed to be exterminated.

Those of us in English Studies face an earnest task in trying to empower our students so they can survive the academic community, as well as the world outside the ivory doors. The way we do this is by building models with which to teach and create a philosophy of education. And these models are built on metaphors, metaphors that can defeat, or aid our task. What we must do as educators is step back from the metaphors we use, examine them through various colored lenses, recognizing both what is useful and that which is damaging. We must choose the best metaphors, and the optimum models, by which to empower our students.

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